

Ducks Unlimited, the 2007 Farm Bill & You

Farm the Best, Conserve the Rest

The Farm Bill will be reauthorized in 2007, and given its potential for waterfowl conservation, Ducks Unlimited's Board has made the reauthorization process a top organizational priority for 2006. The [2007 Farm Bill](#) will include conservation programs that provide tremendous benefits to waterfowl habitat and are vital to supporting DU's mission. DU is working with Congress, the Administration, other conservation leaders, as well as with private landowners, farmers, and ranchers to ensure that key conservation provisions are maintained and improved in the 2007 Farm Bill.

Voluntary incentive based programs in the Conservation Title of the Farm Bill need to remain a viable option for a successful working landscape. These conservation programs are vital to achieving DU's mission of conserving, restoring, and managing wetlands and associated habitats for North America's waterfowl in a time and cost-efficient manner.

DU's National Priorities for the 2007 Farm Bill

Highest Priorities

- Within the national cap, maintain at least 7.8 million acres of CRP in the Prairie Pothole Region
- Maintain an annual allocation of WRP of at least 250,000 acres, with a nationwide cap of 3,525,000 acres.
- Support a "sodsaver" amendment that removes incentives for those who convert native prairie to cropland.
- Maintain current protection measures for preventing conversion of wetlands to other uses.

Other Priorities

- Focus CSP enhancements more towards active agricultural practices that benefit wildlife, wetlands, and grassland habitat on farms and ranches.
- Support a program that would encourage the long-term protection of native grassland through incentives, similar to the original intent of the GRP to protect two million acres.
- Keep CREP available and allow local flexibility to be applied to specific sites that are beneficial to waterfowl and wetlands conservation.
- Maintain the FRPP program.
- Maintain the WHIP program.
- Focus EQIP more towards agriculture practices that benefit wildlife, wetlands, and grassland habitat.
- Work to reform TSP, RFP, and cooperative agreement policies to allow partners to work more easily with USDA to deliver Farm Bill conservation programs.

BACKGROUND OF PRIORITY FARM BILL PROGRAMS

Conservation Reserve Program ([CRP](#))

Contracts on nearly 28 million of the 36 million CRP acres nationwide are set to expire between 2007 and 2010. There are approximately 7.8 million acres in the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) and half will expire in 2007. Most of these acres consist of large, contiguous blocks of grassland cover interspersed with an abundance of prairie wetlands. The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)

estimates that this level of CRP in the PPR is adding 2 million ducks to the fall flight each year. Research has also shown that events occurring on the breeding grounds such as nesting success, breeding hen survival and duckling survival are largely responsible for the annual fluctuations in continental mallard populations. Though it is apparent that CRP is a critical component of the landscape in the PPR, it is currently under threat. The Farm Service Agency (FSA) has unveiled a plan to offer contract reenrollments and extensions on the expiring acres. Unfortunately, it doesn't appear the PPR will fare very well under this plan. Acceptance rates for the PPR in recent general signups have also been poor and significant changes to the scoring process are needed to make the PPR competitive once again in future signups. It is vital that acres lost through the reenrollment process are replaced and the current level of CRP in the PPR is maintained.

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)

The continental U.S. has lost over 50% of its wetlands and continues to lose these habitats at an alarming rate. One of the most successful federal wetlands conservation programs is the Wetlands Reserve Program, which provides a voluntary, non-regulatory, incentive-based program for private landowners, farmers and ranchers to protect and restore the functions and values of wetlands on their property. WRP has provided an avenue for farmers and ranchers to remove marginal croplands. The changes that occur through the WRP provide societal benefits such as improved water quality and quantity, reduced flood damage and enhanced wildlife habitat. Producer demand for this program outstrips available funding by at least a 3:1 margin. The program is authorized to enroll up to 250,000 acres annually; however, at the current rate of enrollment, WRP will cease to exist beyond 2006 unless it is reauthorized and the acreage cap increased.

"Sodsaver"- Amendment that removes incentives for converting native prairie to cropland

There are 22 million acres of native prairie remaining in the PPR. Only about 1 million acres are protected in perpetuity. The highest priority areas that support the highest breeding densities of ducks need to be protected, however, many of these areas are rapidly disappearing. With the current conversion and protection rates, the PPR could lose over half of the remaining native prairie over the next 34 years. The impact of this magnitude of grassland loss on continental waterfowl populations could be catastrophic. The USFWS estimates a decrease of 25,000 ducks in the fall flight with each 1% loss of native prairie in the PPR. The current commodity title of the 2002 Farm Bill provides incentives that encourage farmers to break native sod by substantially reducing the financial risks associated with such activities. An amendment that removes incentives for breaking native sod is needed in the next farm bill in order to maintain these vital nesting habitats. In addition to protecting native prairie, such an amendment would also protect a large percentage of the remaining wetlands by default. Approximately 60% of these unprotected wetlands are surrounded by native prairie.

Maintain current protection measures that prevent conversion of wetlands to other uses

There are approximately 7.3 million acres of wetlands in the PPR and only about 1.5 million acres are perpetually protected. The 1.4 million acres of wetlands at greatest risk (surrounded by cropland) and in most need of protection are also of highest value to breeding waterfowl. Swampbuster has been in law for 20 years and is the only disincentive keeping the "at risk" wetlands from being lost. Many of the other remaining wetlands are located within native prairie or CRP grasslands and are vulnerable to loss or degradation if the surrounding grasslands are converted. The USFWS estimates breeding waterfowl populations in the PPR would be reduced by 38% with the loss of these "at-risk" wetlands.

How You Can Help

Everybody knows that more habitat on the ground means more birds in the sky. However, achieving the fall flights of waterfowling's golden years is something that DU can't do without your support! Waterfowlers, farmers and ranchers are needed to help structure the 2007 Farm Bill.

Over the past two decades, voluntary, incentive-based conservation programs within the Farm Bill, such as CRP and WRP, have provided the framework for "win-win" solutions for farmers, ranchers and wildlife. Science has shown that putting land into programs such as CRP and WRP has resulted in measurable benefits to wildlife populations in many areas of the country. Every year, waterfowlers and wildlife viewers alike benefit from the additional 2.3 million birds produced on land enrolled in CRP alone.



The U.S. House of Representatives Agriculture Committee and the Senate Agriculture Committee will hold a series of field hearings on the reauthorization of legislation that would set agriculture policy in areas such as conservation, commodity programs, rural development, trade, nutrition programs, credit, research forestry, energy and other areas such as

marketing issues and biotechnology.

DU is urging waterfowl conservationists attend involve themselves in the Farm Bill process. If you are planning on attending a hearing or are just talking with friends at the coffee shop, below are a few points to keep in mind to discuss:

- For the US to remain competitive on a global scale it is imperative the cropland is used to its utmost efficiency. This is why conservation programs like CRP and WRP are critical to US agriculture. These programs allow the marginal cropland to be put to use for public benefit (better water quality and quantity, improved soil, wildlife habitat, etc.) and allow the bulk of resources to be invested in the best-performing cropland. More efficient use of cropland will also reduce some of the need for subsidization of crops because money will not have to be spent on squeezing substandard crops out of substandard cropland. Conservation programs should and must be touted as viable solutions for US competitiveness, and are a vital part of the 2007 Farm Bill.
- The goal of new farmers and ranchers entering the agriculture industry should be to first stabilize their income so as to avoid high debt levels. One way to do this is enter marginal cropland into conservation programs. Programs like CRP, WRP, and GRP are great examples of agriculture programs that assist farmers and ranchers in using the best of their acreage for farming and conserving the rest, which has the added benefits of improved soil and water quality. The focus of the 2007 Farm Bill should be providing America's farmers and ranchers options so they can farm the best, and conserve the rest. This type of policy would allow new participants into agriculture a better foothold and help them maintain the agricultural lifestyle that has been the backbone of rural America for generations.
- Programs from the Conservation Title of the Farm Bill could be expanded to allow smaller farms to be able to compete with larger corporate ones by farming/ranching their most productive acre and allowing the less productive acres to become wildlife habitat through programs like CRP, WRP, EQIP, and WHIP. These programs allow farms to compete by allowing them to concentrate their farming on only the most productive land and not sink precious resources into seeding, fertilizing, and spreading pesticide on marginal cropland, while receiving income from the reserved lands to stabilize their income and creating wildlife habitat.
- A strong conservation title in the 2007 Farm Bill benefits everyone. Farmers and ranchers benefit from the additional income from programs like CRP and WRP, and the public benefits by having better water quality and quantity and improved soil quality and more land for wildlife habitat and outdoor recreation. The 2007 Farm Bill is an opportunity to shift away from the standard of plowing and sowing everywhere, even marginal cropland, and towards a policy of "farming the best and conserving the rest" that will allow for more wildlife habitat and improve water quality by reducing erosion.
- Conservation easement programs like CRP and WRP work to the benefit of rural economies as they allow farmers to not waste precious money and resources trying to grow crops on marginal farmland. Conservation programs also eliminate the need for expensive seed, fertilizer and pesticides for use on those marginal croplands, freeing up more money for the farmer to put back into the local economy. Furthermore, with the money saved by not working marginal lands, and with the income from the easement, farmers and ranchers have a more stabilized income and can develop new farming and ranching methods that may not have been available on a previously strained budget.

- The [2007 Farm Bill](#) could be an opportunity to also expand the market for non-agricultural products through a strengthened Conservation title. Lands that are set aside as reserves in programs like WRP and CRP open up new opportunities for landowners in the tourism and recreation field. CRP and WRP lands are ideal for outdoor recreation such as hunting, fishing, birdwatching, mountain biking and an assortment of other outdoor activities that spur rural economies through the industries that support these pursuits. The lands remain under the control of the owner, but the benefits can be shared by the entire community.

We understand that many of you will not be able to attend these field hearings. However, if you are unable to attend, please contact your Member of Congress and let them know how important the conservation provisions in the 2007 Farm Bill are to you.

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Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

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Senate Subcommittee Recommends Maximum Funding for Wetlands Program

MEMPHIS, Tenn., June 20, 2006 – The Senate Appropriations subcommittee for Agriculture, Rural Development and Related Agencies today approved full funding for 250,000 acres for the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). This approval agrees with President Bush's budget request for full funding for the program.

After approval from the full Senate Appropriations Committee, the Senate and House of Representatives will go to conference to determine how many acres will actually be funded in WRP in fiscal year 2007. Earlier this month, the House recommended reducing WRP funding to an all-time low of almost 145,000 acres.

"The subcommittee's recommendation to fully fund 250,000 acres in the Wetlands Reserve Program is good for farmers and ranchers, and for hunters and anglers," said Ducks Unlimited Executive Vice President Don Young. "Now, more than ever, we need strong wetlands restoration programs in light of yesterday's Supreme Court decision that questions how far the Clean Water Act goes in protecting already existing wetlands. Society is quickly learning the many benefits wetlands provide, and the Wetlands Reserve Program is one of the best ways to bring them back."

Scientific studies overwhelmingly prove that wetlands act as filters, cleaning water and recharging groundwater supplies. Wetlands also trap and hold flood waters, lessening the damage from floods and hurricanes. And, wetlands provide a home to more than 900 wildlife species at some time during their lives, making wetlands the most prolific ecosystem in the world.

The Wetlands Reserve Program is a farm bill conservation program popular with farmers and ranchers nationwide. To date, more than 1.6 million acres of wetlands and surrounding areas have been restored or conserved through WRP. Demand is so high for WRP that more than 1 million acres went unfunded during 2004 and 2005.

NAWCA & WRP UPDATE!

Senate Appropriations Committee Restores Funding to Critical Conservation Programs

In contrast to their House counterparts, the Senate Committee on Appropriations has approved full funding for the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). The Committee also restored House cuts made to the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) by recommending \$39.4 million for FY 2007.

On June 20th, the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee for Agriculture, Rural Development and Related Agencies approved full funding for WRP in FY 2007, and on June 22nd the full Senate Committee on Appropriations voted to uphold the Subcommittee's recommendation. This is the first time in the 15-year history of WRP that the program has received both Congressional and Administration support of the 250,000 acre cap promised in the last Farm Bill.

The Senate Appropriations Subcommittee for Interior & Related Agencies recommended on June 27th that NAWCA should receive \$39.4 million for FY 2007. The subcommittee's recommendation was followed by the full committee's endorsement on June 29th. This amount equals the FY 2006 enacted funding level and offsets the House recommendation of \$36.65 million which would have meant a 7% reduction for NAWCA.

The Senate's recognition of the importance to fully fund WRP and its decision to restore the cuts made to NAWCA is a testament to the volume of Ducks Unlimited's collective voice, made possible by the countless numbers of DU supporters that took the time to contact their legislators regarding these important pieces of legislation. Thank you for taking action!

Once the final Senate Appropriations bill is approved, and because of the difference in WRP and NAWCA funding passed by the House, select members of both the House and Senate Appropriations Committees will meet in a conference committee to work out the differences between their two funding bills. As those selected for conference are confirmed, Ducks Unlimited will once again ask for your help to remind the conferees as to the importance of NAWCA and WRP funding.

Please help ensure the future of waterfowl and waterfowling by checking back often for updates as to how you can take action.